Creating the ideal patient and visitor experience in a county hospital

Organization: East Jefferson General Hospital, Metairie, LA
Industry: Healthcare

When it comes to providing care, healthcare facilities focus largely on the quality of clinical processes and outcomes. In many cases, customer service does not get the same detailed orchestration as does a clinical procedure.

Such was the situation in the late 1980s with East Jefferson General, a New Orleans-area county hospital. Patients sat in stale waiting areas. There was little emphasis on esthetic environment. Patient comfort was often sacrificed for staff schedules.

When Peter Betts took the helm as CEO in 1982, he had a different vision. He wanted to create a hospital that ran more like a business, one that was focused as much on customer service as on clinical excellence.

He attended a series of programs the Disney Institute offers known as “The Disney Approach.” Featuring Disney principles and practices for topics including people management and quality service, these programs provide professionals from all walks of organizational life with an inside look at how a world-class company approaches critical business issues.

One would wonder what a healthcare entity could learn from an entertainment company. In reality, as East Jefferson General found, the operations have many parallels. Although the Disney concepts of “good show” versus “bad show,” and “on-stage” versus “backstage” have a strikingly different meaning in a hospital setting in comparison to a theme park, Guests certainly know it when they see it.

The Disney methods inspired a new way of operating for East Jefferson. Betts took his learnings, summoned the support of the hospital staff, and set out to make healthcare “magic.”

Says Betts, “The change in our organization was palpable, even the day after the announcement about the change was made to the management team. Then the employees heard about it and became excited. As more were told through their department meetings, they actually pressured their directors to implement the changes faster,” he says. To solidify personal commitment to change, every employee was required to sign a customer pledge to provide patients (now called ‘Guests’) “the finest in personal service, courtesy and respect, and a satisfying experience.”
Setting the Stage
It was vitally important to focus on the ‘setting’ — the visual environment patients and their visitors experienced. For example, visitors always complained about scarce parking spaces. The hospital forged an agreement with a neighborhood department store whereby all employees parked in the store lot; regular shuttles took employees between the hospital and the parking lot. Then hospital visitors could use the garage exclusively. Employees and visitors alike appreciated always having an available parking space. Visitors appreciated that the hospital put their comfort and convenience above that of the staff.

Instead of staring up at blank walls and ceilings during examinations and procedures, patients now gazed at a mural of clouds and sky. They found signs that were easy to read and helped them navigate their way around hospital corridors. Painstaking attention was placed on clearing up typical clutter in the hallways so that visitor areas looked neat and presentable.

Another important change came with the intent to prepare employees to be service heroes, rather than service failures. Previously, the Operating Room area receptionist would feel frustrated by multiple inquiries when a loved one was in a lengthy surgery, because there was no new information to provide. The visitor would feel exceedingly frustrated when no updated status information was available. A new lighting system was created that connected the operating rooms with the receptionist desk. One color light signified surgery in process; another signified post-op; still another signified “all clear.” This new system equipped the receptionist to advise the visitor when the patient had been moved to post-op. At the same time, it alerted orderlies that it was time to clean up the room.

Results
Today the East Jefferson way of doing business is more evident than ever before. And the structural changes reflect, more than ever, the hospital’s continuing commitment to high-quality, customer-focused service.

For example, a new parking garage is designed to prevent patients and visitors from having to walk more than 35 steps before encountering a staff member. The hospital is accessible from any floor in the parking garage, eliminating the need for an elevator ride. Specially designed rooms line the hallway in the Same-Day Surgery unit. These rooms include beds, bathrooms, several chairs and other amenities, so that families can wait with patients while they recover from surgery. In the Intensive Care Unit where stress is exceptionally high, families find a spacious and comfortable waiting area, as well as an outdoor courtyard where they can get fresh air and relief from the pressure of the wait.
In addition, East Jefferson has just opened a Wellness Center aimed at the senior market. Says Betts, “There are no gals in thongs or guys bench-pressing 400 pounds here. Simply put, a senior citizen won’t feel comfortable getting into the pool to do arthritis exercises with young people running around. It’s attention to details such as these that create a ‘Disney difference’ for our hospital,” he says.

East Jefferson’s success is also evident in its steady rise of market share, as well as increased community awareness about the hospital’s devotion to high-end patient care. Market research has revealed a “top of mind” increase in awareness of East Jefferson from 46 percent to 57 percent. Turnover has been reduced by seven percent. The hospital now has 10,000 applicants for every 400 openings.

“Our Disney experience has helped to enhance our culture more than any other external activity or event we have experienced to date. We continue to draw from that experience, as well as send more staff members to the “Disney Approach” series. We have even hired a former Disney Cast Member (Disney’s term for employee) to help us with our culture and guest satisfaction issues,” says Betts.